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Opinion

Lessons from Vanport: We Are All Survivors

I am one of the survivors of the Vanport Flood. It is with great appreciation that I am delighted to read so many articles, or attend events, that speak about a city so forgotten.

I feel that this awakening of Vanport has caused people to take a look at this lost city, wanting to be educated historically, and listen with great anticipation the stories of those that helped write the pages of history in Vanport. So I have learned that every story told is important. Every encounter shared, helps to make the puzzle complete. And that is why I share my piece willingly.

There is a passage in the Bible that helps my story be told with an understanding. In 1 Corinthians 13:11 it says, "When I was a child, I spake as child, I understood as a child; but when I became a man, I put away childish things." So when the flood occurred I was seven-and-a-half years of age. My family consisted of eight siblings, and my parents.

Fortunately we were not at home when the flood happened. Upon our return, we dealt with the fact that we had no home to return to. The only thing I could think of was my doll that was somewhere in the water and the slice of chocolate cake I didn't get to

Laura Ann Howard

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Essay Contest Winner*

eat. I had no understanding why my mother was so angry with me as I wept over my doll and the cake; after all, I was only seven.

It's amazing, because a few years ago I realized that not

“I had no understanding why my mother was so angry with me as I wept over my doll and the cake

only were we homeless, we were abandoned in a sense from our parents. We had never separated from them, and now we are staying in three different places without our parents, and in the morning we would have to put the same clothes back on again.

I was not old enough to understand losing important documents, birth certificates,



Survivors gather on high ground to watch the destruction of Vanport. May 30, 1948.

pictures, all of our belongings. All we had was each other. One thing I know for a fact is we as kids were sheltered from all the things that bought us to Vanport: the lifestyle of the city, a place that was thrown together so fast, it took the people living there to make it a home — even hope in the midst of fear, war, poverty, and racism. The stories at 76 years old have given me a sense of pride that at seven I just didn't comprehend.

When I think now of Vanport I am persuaded that there was a sense of pride that taught us how to move forward and not get stuck on ig-

norance amidst all the oppositions we encountered. I am very blessed that my eyesight of seeing things at the tender age of seven was locked into my memory, and it was not tarnished by the chaos that occurred Sunday, May 30, 1948.

Although as survivors of Vanport, we don't have a color that identifies the nature of our experience, what we do have is a song in our hearts that we can all blend our voices harmoniously and sing even though the songs might be different we yet have one thing in common: We are all survivors of the Vanport Flood.

Lessons From Vanport: Don't Let History Wash Away

The Black kids live on the other side of the river. They commit crimes.' This is what my fourth-grade teacher taught our class in southwest Portland. As the only Black child in the room I remained silent apologizing for behavior I had never done. This was as close to learning about African Americans in Portland as I would come.

As the child of immigrants growing up in a predominantly White neighborhood, I was force-fed an untrue story and shame was sewed early into my identity. Learning about Vanport now has been akin to an adopted child finding a piece of their true identity. I have a story.

It was 4:17 on May 30, 1948, when the dike collapsed. African Americans and Whites rushed out of Vanport as the water levels rose. In one day, the second largest city in Oregon was destroyed.

But it was a city built on a flood plan. African Americans in search of a better life in the Northwest were relegated to live in the most dangerous area. This has taught me the implications of structural racism — that beyond working hard, there must be changes at policy level to ad-

Muyoka Mwarabu

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vocate for equality for African Americans.

The day of the flood, the Housing Authority of Portland told Vanport, "Dikes are safe at Present. Don't get excited." The sirens only went off 30 minutes before the city began to be buried by water.

This has taught me that lies

“I played soccer at Delta Park not knowing I was kicking a ball next to a grave site

are a form of mental oppression. The lies I was handed in fourth grade were a continuation of a long legacy of misleading minorities to stunt their advancement. The story of Vanport has taught me not to accept all words as truth



Postcard showing floating buildings in Vanport flood 1948.

and seek out primary sources for true information.

After the flood waters erased Vanport, there was a second coverup. The event was erased from the Oregon history books. I remember learning about The Oregon Trail, Lewis and Clark, the Multnomah Indians but I never heard of Vanport. I played soccer at Delta Park not knowing I was kicking a ball next to a grave site. Portland State handed me a degree with honors and never taught me that the school was originally founded as Vanport College and originally located in the area that was washed away 69 years ago.

This has taught me that "history" is *his*-story, and as an African American female, my

story is easily washed away. I have to record it to tell others about Vanport.

I now live on a house on a hill, a recipient of the benefits of another generations fight against oppression. My daughter is five, and has just started kindergarten. When she reaches fourth grade, she will be prepared. When the teacher begins her Oregon history lesson, she will rise, head held high and tell the teacher she would like to give a presentation on Vanport. The story of some of the first African American settlers in Portland, how hard they worked, the college that was built and the flood that destroyed their homes. The story of Vanport. She will teach them her story.